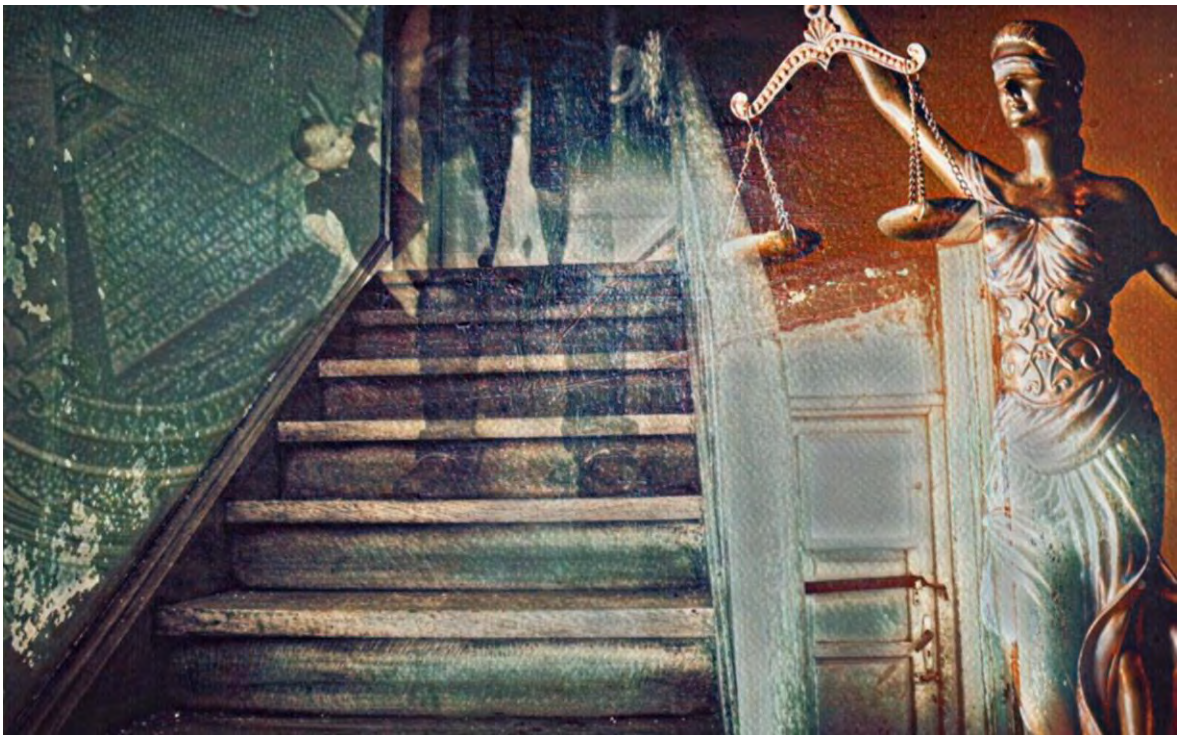
5 Florida Judges Reprimanded in $500 Million Child Welfare Agency Conflict

By Corey Lynn



Five Florida judges were recently reprimanded for favoring one child welfare agency over another in a $500 million state contract, which is now before the Supreme Court. Our Kids Miami-Dade Monroe Inc. was the agency of choice, who has held the contract with the state since former Governor Jeb Bush doubled funding for privatized foster care. This tight knit group of "child advocates" spearheaded the efforts to airlift hundreds of Haitian children to Florida in the immediate aftermath of the 2010 earthquake, but that's just the tip of the iceberg.

• The judge who penned the letter to DCF favoring Our Kids in a bid for a $500 million contract, also went to bat for them back in 2004.

• Foster children in Miami-Dade and Monroe counties have been moved as many as 10-20 times, and 25 children were moved to more than 80 foster homes.

• Just one week after the 2010 Haiti earthquake, then Secretary of the Florida Department of Children and Family Services George Sheldon, initiated the plan to airlift nearly hundreds of Haitian children over to Florida, 'Our Kids' and the Miami Archdiocese simultaneously got on board, Janet Napolitano lifted visas, Joe Biden visited the Miami Archdiocese, and Sheldon landed himself the position of Acting Assistant Secretary for Children & Families with HHS.

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In May 2019, five South Florida judges of the 11th Circuit Unified Children's Court faced charges for favoring a company in a competitive bidding process for the Florida Department of Children and Families. The Florida Judicial Qualifications Commission determined that they had violated Florida's Code of Judicial Conduct and recommended a public reprimand by publication, but Florida Supreme Court has the final word of judicial discipline, which is still pending. They were favoring child welfare agency Our Kids Miami-Dade Monroe, Inc. over Citrus Health Network, Inc. in a 5-year $500 million contract with the Department of Child Services for foster care and adoption services. Our Kids had held the contract for over a decade.

Photo credit: GAL

Retired Judge Cindy Lederman had authored a letter addressed to the Florida Department of Children and Family Services (DCF), which four other judges signed. A fifth judge, Maria Sampedro-Iglesia had also signed it but was not part of the inquiry and has since retired. General Magistrate Steven Lieberman had also signed it, but was not part of the inquiry. A snippet from the letter clearly shows their bias.

"This model must survive the ITN process ….. We have worked with Our Kids and we have complete faith only in the Our Kids model of leadership. When you select the agency please keep our voices in your mind."

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CIRCUIT COURT
ELEVENTH JUDICIAL CIRCUIT OF FLORIDA

CINDY S. LEDERMAN
CIRCUIT JUDGE

GELBER AND GLADSTONE
MIAMI-DADE COUNTY CHILDREN'S COURTHOUSE
155 N.W. 3RD STREET
MIAMI, FLORIDA 33128

September 28, 2018

Bronwyn Stanford
Managing Director of the Southern Region of Florida
Department of Children and Families
401 NW 2nd Avenue
N1007
Miami, Florida 33128

Dear Bronwyn Stanford,

We are writing to you to express our support for true community based care. Each of us is an experienced dependency judge in Miami Dade County and each of us cares deeply about the future of our child welfare system.

Our CBC Alliance studied privatization models for several years before designing our current model in 2005. They were adamant that the leadership of our child welfare system be composed of community leaders, none of whom profited financially from child welfare. The Our Kids Board has continued to be populated by lawyers, successful businessmen and businesswomen, doctors, volunteers, financial experts and former foster children. It is a system that works. They have welcomed community input, community criticism and community partnerships for reform.

The CBC Alliance and the child welfare community demanded managerial changes and Our Kids listened. The wonderful George Sheldon became the CEO and important reforms were instituted.

The Our Kids Board is answerable to the community. They are our community's experts in child welfare policy and practice.

This model must survive the ITN process.

We have worked with Our Kids and we have complete faith only in the Our Kids model of leadership. When you select the agency please keep our voices in your mind.

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CIRCUIT JUDGE

GELBER AND GLADSTONE
MIAMI-DADE COUNTY CHILDREN'S COURTHOUSE
155 N.W. 3RD STREET
MIAMI, FLORIDA 33128

Sincerely,

Judge Cindy Lederman
11th Circuit Unified Children's Court

Judge Mari Sampedro-Iglesia
11th Circuit Unified Children's Court
Associate Administrative Judge

Judge Rosa Figarola
11th Circuit Unified Children's Court

Judge Teresa Pooler
11th Circuit Unified Children's Court

Judge Mavel Ruiz
11th Circuit Unified Children's Court

General Magistrate Steven Lieberman
11th Circuit Unified Children's Court

Judge Marcia Caballero
11th Circuit Unified Children's Court

CC:
Rebecca Kapusta
Interim Director of the Department of Children and Families
1317 Winewood Blvd.
Building 1, Room 202
Tallahassee, Florida

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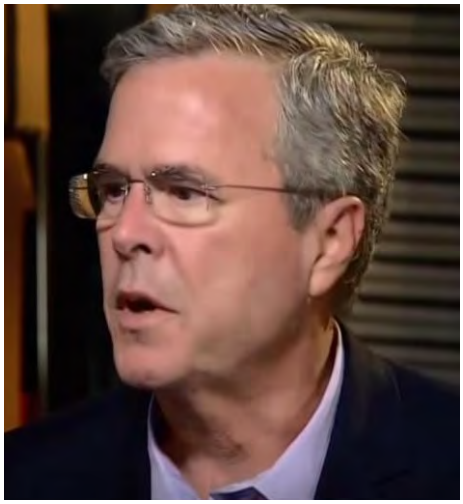
Ultimately, in the end, Citrus Health received the contract. So why are these judges so invested in Our Kids? Let's take a look at the history of the foster care system in Florida, Our Kids history and reputation, and several people connected to Our Kids, to glean what this favoritism may be all about. After reviewing the facts, perhaps this "hot mess" will become a bit clearer, as there are some very concerning connections dating back to the privatization, Haiti, and child tragedies.

Former Gov. Jeb Bush Doubled Down on Privatized Foster Care



Florida began an experiment with privatized child welfare services in 1996 when the State Department of Children and Families spent $27.5 million on five pilot programs between 1997-2000. Only one program in Sarasota Fla was successful. Despite this, and the lack of evidence to show that privatizing foster care would be beneficial for children, in 1998 the Florida legislature mandated that all foster care and related services be privatized between 2000 and 2002. This mandated that DCF contract with a single lead agency, referred to as Community-based Care (CBCs) that administer services in each area.

In 1999 Jeb Bush became governor of Florida and served two terms through 2007. By 2004, forty-two percent of Florida was operating under privatized foster care and adoption services, and Our Kid's was in negotiations for managing the $500 million 5-year contract in Miami-Dade and Monroe counties – a contract that Judge Cindy Lederman was eager to see them get.

By 2011, reports came out indicating that privatized foster care and adoption services was costing millions more than it was when it was state run. The Sun Sentinel quoted former **Gov. Jeb Bush, "We doubled the state funding, which was woefully underfunded, when I became governor," Spending went up because much-needed services "weren't being provided, and now they are," Bush said.**

As time went on, reports reflected that the foster care system got far worse, more tragedies occurred, and at one point they had no idea where 500 children were, under Jeb Bush's watch. In 2018, the Tampa Bay Times did an investigation tracking the placement of over 280,000 foster children between 2000 and 2017 in Florida. They found that thousands of foster children were being moved numerous times with more than 7,500 moved an average of once a month. Others had been placed as many as six times in one month. One child was moved 50 times within one year, and another 43 times. **Since 2013, there has been a 40 percent rise in the number of children in foster care homes or housed with relatives, in the state of Florida.**

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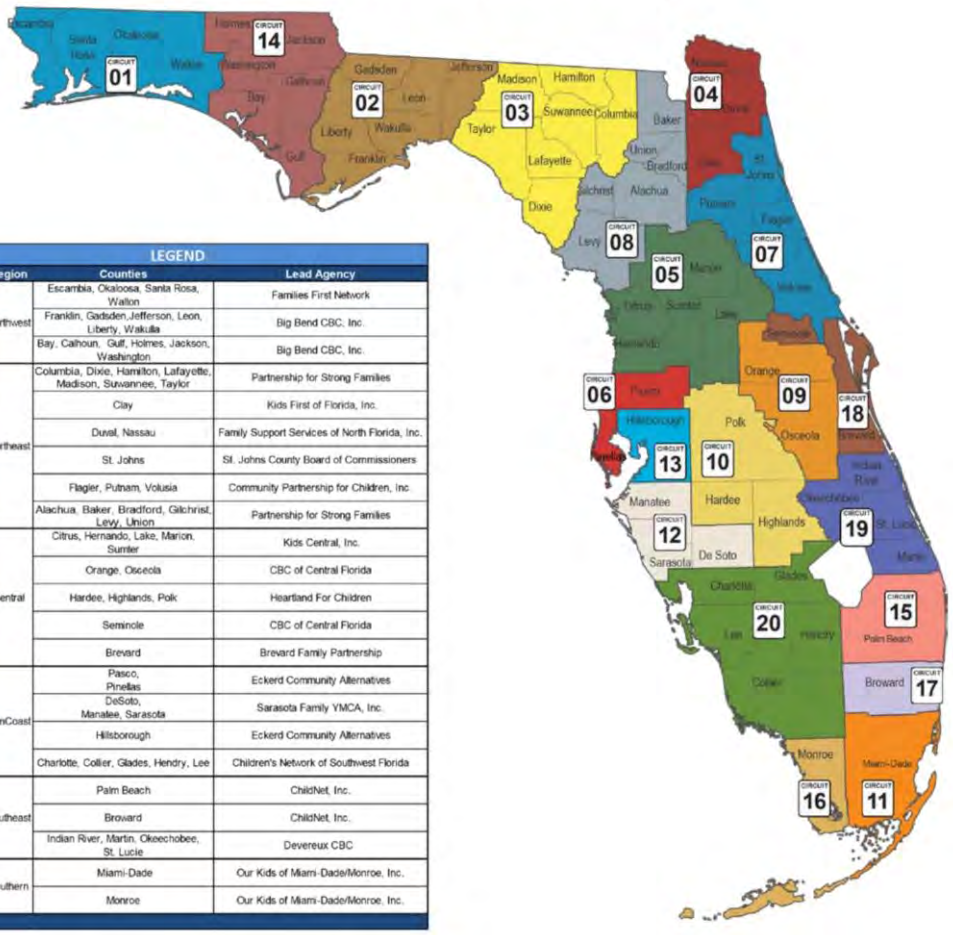
Our Kids Miami-Dade Monroe Inc. Red Flags

Our Kids is a non-profit that was founded in 2002, and manages foster care and adoption services for the entire southern tip of Florida, as well as the Keys. It's neighbor **ChildNet Inc.** serves Broward and Palm Beach counties, and they've had their fair share of issues as well. In 2013 they paid $2.2 million to settle a case involving two young girls that were repeatedly sexually abused by their mother, after they had been warned by experts and judges.

By 2016, ChildNet had a major deficit, and the $67 million annual federal funding was no longer cutting it. A task force was created to review the situation, and found that there was a staggering increase in the number of at-risk children entering the system. **The Broward County Sheriff's Office Child Protective Investigators had removed nearly 1,400 children in 2015 alone, and were doing so at a rate of 7.8 per 100 children, compared to the statewide rate of 6.4.** Why mention ChildNet when the focus is on Our Kids? Because there is a clear pattern of abuse and neglect happening in Florida and some of these individuals in this report cross into these boundaries as well.

DCF Regions, Judicial Circuits and CBC Lead Agencies



LEGEND			
Circuit	Region	Counties	Lead Agency
1	Northwest	Escambia, Okaloosa, Santa Rosa, Walton	Families First Network
2		Franklin, Gadsden, Jefferson, Leon, Liberty, Wakulla	Big Bend CBC, Inc.
14		Bay, Calhoun, Gulf, Holmes, Jackson, Washington	Big Bend CBC, Inc.
3	Northeast	Columbia, Dixie, Hamilton, Lafayette, Madison, Suwannee, Taylor	Partnership for Strong Families
4		Clay	Kids First of Florida, Inc.
4		Duval, Nassau	Family Support Services of North Florida, Inc.
7		St. Johns	St. Johns County Board of Commissioners
7		Flagler, Putnam, Volusia	Community Partnership for Children, Inc.
8		Alachua, Baker, Bradford, Gilchrist, Levy, Union	Partnership for Strong Families
5	Central	Citrus, Hernando, Lake, Marion, Sumter	Kids Central, Inc.
9		Orange, Osceola	CBC of Central Florida
10		Hardee, Highlands, Polk	Heartland For Children
18		Seminole	CBC of Central Florida
18		Brevard	Brevard Family Partnership
6	SunCoast	Pasco, Pinellas	Eckerd Community Alternatives
12		DeSoto, Manatee, Sarasota	Sarasota Family YMCA, Inc.
13		Hillsborough	Eckerd Community Alternatives
20		Charlotte, Collier, Glades, Hendry, Lee	Children's Network of Southwest Florida
15	Southeast	Palm Beach	ChildNet, Inc.
17		Broward	ChildNet, Inc.
19		Indian River, Martin, Okeechobee, St. Lucie	Devereux CBC
11	Southern	Miami-Dade	Our Kids of Miami-Dade/Monroe, Inc.
16		Monroe	Our Kids of Miami-Dade/Monroe, Inc.

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Our Kids facebook and LinkedIn are both down. Their website is called "fostering our kids," not making it the easiest site to find, considering they deal with foster homes, adoptions, and seek volunteers. In fact, their main business listing in google doesn't even reflect their website link. Their homepage slogan states, "Be a hero. Foster, adopt, volunteer, give." How are folks supposed to do that when they don't even list their website? When you click on "About Our Kids" or "Privacy Policy" it takes you to a dead link of an older website of theirs that is now defunct. After several attempts at manually typing a url for their "About Our Kids" page, and repetitive 404 errors, it would seem that they do not have an "About" page. Gosh, for $100 million per year federal grant, one would think they would keep this info tip-top and fully accessible.

What's curious, is that they seem to go out of their way to conceal who the founders really are. 2004 tax returns reflect **Barbara Ibarra** as the President, and an article in the Miami Herald refers to her as the founding President of Our Kids. Her husband, **Charles D. Scurr** serves as the Executive Director of the Citizen's Independent Transportation Trust. He was the former City Manager of the City of South Miami, Florida, as well as the Executive Assistant for Miami-Dade County and the City of Miami. Additionally, he served with the Urban Mass Transportation Administration in Washington, DC and Atlanta, GA, and with the Miami-Dade Transportation Administration.

Another name mentioned as a "founder" is **Berta Blecke**, a Miami child advocate. She is also listed on tax returns as a Trustee of Our Kids. Blecke is very close friends with **Janet Reno**, who served as the Attorney General of the United States from 1993 – 2001, by former President Bill Clinton's appointment. Blecke also serves on the Janet Reno Endowment Advisory Committee, as does **Janet Napolitano**, the former United States Secretary of Homeland Security. She was mentioned as a close friend and colleague, along with Eric Holder and others, in 'The Making of Janet Reno: The People's Lawyer.' Blecke is also a founding board member of the Florida Foster Care Review. **Berta's husband James C. Blecke is listed as Judge Cindy Lederman's attorney for the recent reprimand of her drafting the letter trying to sway the $500 million contract toward Our Kids.**

Two individuals that played vital roles in facilitating Our Kids are **George Sheldon**, former Secretary of the Florida Department of Children and Family Services, and former AG of Florida, **Bob Butterworth** – both of whom served on the board of Our Kids, were very close friends, and have extensive backgrounds as well as connections. These roles go back to the tragic days of airlifting children over from Haiti after the 2010 earthquake, as documented below in this report.

In reviewing their 2002 articles of incorporation, an **H. William Walker Jr.** is identified as the registered agent, and there are 22 initial trustees listed. Walker is a real estate lawyer, ordained priest of the Episcopal Church, was chairman of the board for United Way of Florida, founding trustee of Trinity Episcopal School, founding president and director of the Florida Foster Care Review Project, founding director of Kristi House, and of course vice chairman and trustee of Our Kids. **Berta Blecke** was a fulltime volunteer at Kristi House, a treatment center for children

that specializes in sexual abuse, and as mentioned above, was also a founding board member of the Florida Foster Care Review. **Barbara Ibarra** was one of the trustees of the Kristi House, going by the name "Bobbie." Another trustee was **David Lawrence**, who has a very extensive background in advocating for children, beginning in 1999 after having been the publisher of both the Miami Herald and the Detroit Free Press. He was also named by then Gov. Jeb Bush to the Florida Partnership for School Readiness, and served on the board twice.

In glancing over some of Our Kids Google reviews, there are some big red flags. One individual said that she wanted to be a foster parent, went through the classes, and the case worker never showed up. She tried for months and no one ever returned her calls. Another person went on quite a rant about how they lie and will do anything to get children adopted that end up back in the foster care system. They suggested that Our Kids would be sued for their wrongdoings, then turned up later to gloat about them losing their contract. A third woman claimed that the case workers never respond, nor do they respond to the kids. The ones that did leave four or five stars, had nothing to say, with the exception of a few that were "translated by Google," two of which weren't even in the context of reviews and made little sense.

Red Flags

On **February 14, 2011** a tragedy occurred when a survivor and victim were found in a pest control truck along the side of I-95 in Palm Beach County. Their adoptive father, Jorge Barahona, owned the truck. The 11-year-old victim was dead and the survivor suffered severe injuries and was covered in chemicals. Sadly, these children had been terribly tortured and physically and sexually abused for years, likely since the Barahona's gained custody in 2004.

The state had placed these children into the foster home of the Barahona's, and later facilitated their adoption. The survivor and the victim's estate sued DCF and two of its private contractors, Our Kids of Miami-Dade/Monroe Inc., and the Center for Family and Child Enrichment, in parallel state and federal suits, and won a $500 million suit.

In 2012, children in a foster care group home that was a subcontractor of Our Kids, were being pimped out by child sex traffickers. Four South Florida men were arrested. One of the four charged was a 46-year-old **DCF child abuse investigator**.

In 2015, a criminal investigation ensued into the Family Resource Center, a subcontractor of Our Kids, for one of their employees raping a 17-year-old girl when tasked to transport her on an eight-hour drive to their center in Key West. Miami-Dade Circuit **Judge Maria Sampedro-Iglesia** said that the actions of a private social service agency were borderline "reckless." That's

putting it mildly. **Perhaps it was put "mildly" because this is one of the judges who signed the letter authored by Judge Cindy Lederman stating that "the court will work only with Our Kids, Inc." AFTER what happened to this poor girl. She resigned on April 28, 2019.**

Between June 2013 and May 2014 there had been an 11 percent increase in children requiring out-of-home care, which apparently created a financial challenge for "certain" CBCs. Coincidentally, ChildNet and Our Kids were the two CBCs that received addition funding totaling over $10.5 million between the two.

In 2016, a Florida judge fired at the Children's Home Society of Florida for forcing children to perform "cockfights" and brawls at one of the Miami group homes, which Our Kids runs for CHS.

In 2017, two men and one woman were charged for alleged sex trafficking of a Miami-Dade 16-year-old foster teen, forcing her into prostitution. That beat her, drugged her, and forced her to have sex with them as well as others. The teen had run away from her foster home claiming that she had been kicked out.

Also in 2017, three top administrators of Our Kids resigned after two adolescent foster care girls hanged themselves at foster homes overseen by Our Kids. 16-year-old Lauryn Martin-Everett hung herself at the Florida Keys Youth Shelter after being moved between 9 foster homes in two years. Thirty-eight days later, 14-year-old Naika Venant hung herself in the bathroom of a Miami Garden foster home. She had live-streamed it on Facebook, where it remained for several weeks, and it made national headlines.

In 2018, Bernard Perlmutter, Robert Latham and Stewart Cooke joined with Children's Rights and Baker McKenzie law firm to **file a suit against Florida DCF**, specifically in Miami-Dade and Monroe counties, to stop the mistreatment of foster care children in a broken system. They felt that so much harm has been done to foster care children, only a lawsuit could begin to fix the problems. They stated that DCF reports reflect the following:

Records show that hundreds of children have had more than 10, or even 20 or more, moves. More than over 25 kids have been moved more than 80 times. DCF's own reports stated that numerous foster children have not even received appropriate mental health.

One has to ask, is the moving of 25 kids to 80 different foster homes a method of human trafficking that has been overlooked? Is it possible that some of these abusive homes are setup to "share" the children while collecting their stipend from the government? Or is this another means for shuffling funds?

It is well documented that the United States has a big human trafficking issue, and that human traffickers prey upon children in the foster care system. And, it is no secret that Florida is ranked No. 3 in the nation for the number of human trafficking cases reported.

The Contract, The Judge, and The Wages

In June, 2004 Our Kids was in negotiations with the state for a huge contract to service Miami-Dade and Monroe counties. They had been debating over the budget for months, and apparently got hung up over $1 million dollars of the $92 million they had already agreed upon. **Berta Blecke**, who was involved with the negotiations stated, "This is 1 percent of our budget that we're arguing over. We should have ended it in May. Now we're in June."

Coincidentally, **Miami-Dade Chief Juvenile Court Judge Cindy Lederman** was also involved in helping them get this contract, stating, “we’re $1 million between disaster and excellence.” Lederman was part of the Miami-Dade Community Based Care Alliance, and in their Thursday meeting had referred to DCF as being ridiculous for bickering over a relatively small sum with Our Kids. This Alliance called for a special meeting to include former **Gov. Jeb Bush and DCF** Secretary Jerry Regier so as to push this along.

Lederman went so far as to tell representatives of Our Kids, “If we don’t resolve this by June 15, why would you even want to continue working under those circumstances?”

Of course, Our Kids locked in the contract, and proceeded to service those counties all the way up until this year, when the heated battle with Citrus Health broke out and the five judges were reprimanded.

During Our Kids service, questions were raised regarding the steep wages being paid to the executives, some of whom were making as much as six figures, which is twice as much as state employees were paid. Whereas, eyes were on several agencies, 2011 tax returns revealed that Our Kids was the highest-paid. **CEO Frances Allegra** was taking in a cool $200,000. That was well above was both the Governor and the secretary of DCF were being paid. In addition to Allegra, seven other executives also made six figures and the CIO made $221,000.

Their neighbor, ChildNet Inc. over in Broward County was also paying six figure salaries to four executives and their CEO Emilio Benitez earned $182,000. Benitez seemed to be under the illusion that it was justified due to “outperforming their predecessors, and they are doing so with virtually the same, or even less, money.” Even Jeb Bush admitted to doubling the amount paid to private agencies, which equated to the state paying out more on privatization than they had when foster care was run by the state.

After serving as the largest provider of child welfare services in the state of Florida for over a decade in southern Florida, Our Kids lost the intense battle with Citrus Health Network Inc. for another $500 million, five-year contract. Their contract ended June 30, 2019 followed by a massive layoff of more than 160 employees.

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George Sheldon, Former Secretary of FL and IL Dept. of Children and Family Services, Former Assistant Secretary to US HHS, and Former CEO of Our Kids

Photo credit: Wikipedia

George Sheldon had an extensive background in both politics and in child advocacy positions prior to his passing at age 71 last year, due to an accident on his home gym. Sheldon and Bob Butterworth had a very close friendship and working relationship. In 1999, Sheldon served as Deputy AG for Central Florida under AG Bob Butterworth. Then in 2008, he became the Secretary of the Florida Department of Children and Family Services just after his friend Butterworth had served in that position.

Butterworth and Sheldon oversaw an experiment in child welfare financing that former Gov. Jeb Bush had initiated after securing a statewide waiver of Florida's Title IV-E funds. This expanded funding beyond foster care and adoption placements, to include other family related services. Whereas they praised the state reducing its foster care rolls by 32 percent, they note that they moved more quickly to finalize adoptions for children whose parents had their rights terminated. Moving quickly on adoptions is disconcerting when considering the number of parents who have illegally had their parental rights removed.

In 2011, after Sheldon was instrumental in getting nearly 1,000 children airlifted from Haiti to Florida immediately following the earthquake, President Obama advanced him to the Acting Assistant Secretary for the Federal Administration for Children and Families in the US Department of Health and Human Services. He served in that position for two years. A reward, perhaps?

In February 2015, Sheldon slid over to Chicago, Obama's old stomping grounds, and was put in charge of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services there. However, after two years, Sheldon resigned following an ethics probe for DCFS contracts he was funneling to people in Florida that he had connections with, and in some cases, investments with.

For starters, upon his arrival to his new position, he hired a Florida technology firm called Five Points Technology Group. This group subcontracted with Christopher Pantaleon for a $30,000 job. Sheldon extended the contract for two years, resulting in a payout of $262,000. In addition, Pantaleon billed DCFS $17,774 for flights, hotels, and taxis, being as he was flying to Illinois from Florida. Pantaleon is a longtime Sheldon aide and co-owned a rental home in Florida with him.

He commissioned the Zachary Group, a Florida company that produces public service announcements, in a $35,000 no-bid contract.

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Sheldon also appointed Florida based Eckerd Connects' Chief External Relations Officer Jody Grutza to a senior DCFS position, paying $125,000. She was put in charge of overseeing the Five Points Technology contract. He also brought on other Florida connections into senior positions, and was awarding lucrative contracts to Florida firms rather than Illinois firms.

One of those firms was Eckerd Connects in partnership with Mindshare Technology, which mined electronic DCFS files and assigned a 1-100 score to children who were the victims of abuse via the agency hotline. This algorithm, known as the 'Rapid Safety Feedback' program, would rate the children's risk of death or being severely injured during the following two years. This $366,000 "predictive analytics" contract and it's accuracy came under fire when caseworkers testified that they were alarmed by the number of alerts whereby children were rated as needing urgent protection. More than 4,100 Illinois children were assigned a 90 percent or greater probability of death or injury.

Needless to say, this so-called predictive analytics didn't seem to be giving them warning into two horrific deaths of children, nor did DCFS appear to take enough action in what they saw firsthand. After 10 DCFS abuse investigations, 17-month-old Semaj Crosby was found dead under a couch in Joliet township. And, after 8 DCFS investigations into the home of 22-month-old Itachi Boyle, she too was found dead.

The new DCFS Director Beverly Walker shut down the predictive analytics contract stating, "we are not doing the predictive analytics because it didn't seem to be predicting much." However, she is still utilizing the case analysis training provided by Eckerd. Due to several no-bid deals that Sheldon was giving to his associates in Florida, among other ethics issues, the Office of Executive Inspector General and the DCFS Inspector General concluded that Sheldon and DCFS had classified the Eckerd/Mindshare deal as a grant instead of a no-bid contract. This allowed them to avoid the state bidding transparency requirements.

Despite all of this, Eckerd has numerous contracts with child welfare agencies in as many as 20 states. Eckered also has a $73 million Florida contract, running the child welfare program in Hillsborough County, where Sheldon and Eckered once worked together closely. In June, 2018 the state of Florida threatened to terminate Eckerd Connects $77 million contract if they didn't come up with an action plan to fix the broken foster care system they were running.

In 2017, Sheldon became the CEO of Our Kids, back in his state of Florida.

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George Sheldon, Our Kids & The Obama Administration: 2010 Airlift of Hundreds of Haitian Children

George Sheldon (left) and Frances Allegra (right)

For years people have been asking, "what happened to the children that were brought over from Haiti? Where are they?" Rightfully so, being as they initiated this before the rubble had even settled, and after what happened with Laura Silsby smuggling 33 children out of Haiti without documentation. Whereas, one might assume that information on adopted children is generally kept hush hush, this was the biggest airlift mission since the "Pedro Pan" airlift of Cuban exile children in the 1960s.

Immediately following the Haiti earthquake in 2010, George Sheldon spearheaded the mission to airlift Haitian Americans and Haitian orphans to Florida, which would all be received by DCF. Here's how quickly that important timeline rolled out:

January 12, 2010 – the tragic earthquake hit Haiti, taking hundreds of thousands of lives.

January 16th – former Vice President Joe Biden traveled to Little Haiti and met with the Miami Archdiocese to assure them of aid.

January 19th – The New York Times was already reporting that there were 53 orphans in the "first wave" of 900 orphans that were matched with parents in the U.S. wanting to adopt. Former US Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano had announced on the 18th that they were waiving visa requirements for Haitian children that were already "in the pipeline for adoption" by American families.

January 19th – Florida DCF began contacting foster care agencies in Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach Counties to get a handle on how many Haitian orphans could be placed. **Our Kids alerted DCF to its interest in helping orphaned children – "we have shelter beds available, along with therapists and support services ready to provide aid," executive director Frances Allegra wrote in an email.** Federal agencies were focusing on the "Operation Vigilant Sentry" crisis plan that was created in 2003 in preparation for any mass migration from the Caribbean.

January 20th – George Sheldon had been meeting with state, county and federal leaders to coordinate refugee resettlement, but stated his concerns for airlifting hundreds or thousands of orphans and uprooting them in a fragile state. Meanwhile, the Archdiocese of Miami, made an "offer" to the federal government and president that they were ready to help spearhead a Pedro Pan-like rescue effort and provide temporary housing. It's important to note that the Archdiocese of Miami had seen dozens of suits filed against them over sexual abuse scandals. A church report from 2007 stated that 49 priests had been involved in sexual misconduct allegations and the archdiocese had paid out more than $21 million.

January 20th – Reports were showing that 50 of the 900 children were already adopted to families in Colorado.

January 30th – Former Florida Governor Charlie Crist announced that between 60 and 80 Haitian orphans had arrived at Miami International Airport.

February 1st – The U.S. Air Force reported on more than 3,000 Haitian earthquake victims already having been processed through Homestead Air Reserve Base in Florida. They stated that 900 of them were children including orphans. Red Cross, DCF, U.S. Customs and medical professionals were all on deck.

August 3rd – The New York Times reported that the babylift went on for months, and that 1,150 Haitian children were swept up, which was more than what American families had adopted in the previous three years. Adoptions were expedited, improper screening took place, and children were released without legal documents showing they were orphans. Haiti orphanages were emptied out, and there was a lot of heated controversy over how this was all handled, and how children were removed before even determining if their family members or relatives were still alive.

In a DCF newsletter just after the earthquake, they reported that more than two weeks after the earthquake, DCF was already at around-the-clock operations at airports in Miami, Sanford, Homestead, and Fort Lauderdale, and they had already welcomed over 15,000 survivors. This coming shortly after Sheldon's earlier announcement stating they were not going to move them out quickly in waves. Whereas they detail a handful of stories more specific to "reuniting families," they don't go into specifics regarding the number of Haitian orphans.

After Sheldon's death in 2018, several articles praised Sheldon for his tremendous efforts in spearheading **"round-the-clock shifts that lasted a month" for DCF staff. They met 1,056 flights of returning Haitian Americans, and sheltered and processed 720 Haitian orphans destined for adoptive families."** DCF also gave out $26 million in cash assistance.

That said, it seems most of the orphans arrived at Homestead base and/or in Miami-Dade County. Our Kids had already stated they were ready to help, and they were in fact the child welfare agency for that county. Former CEO Frances Allegra is seen in the above photo with George Sheldon and two Haitian children. Reports vary between 720 up to 1,150 children.

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According to the US Dept. of State adoption statistics, there were only 424 adoptions in 2010, and 398 in 2011 throughout the state of Florida. How many of these children circulated the foster care system? If someone really wants to get to the bottom of where all of these children ended up, Our Kids should be the first stop. The Miami Archdiocese would be a good second stop.

Sheldon also received praise from longtime friend and former CEO of Our Kids, Frances Allegra. Mark Riordan, Sheldon's former spokesman, said, "George's work to protect children orphaned by the earthquake was heroic. He mobilized a social services army."

Fran Allegra
@fpallegra
I think George would agree that his finest hour was his leadership of Florida's response to the devastation following the earthquake in Haiti. Many children and families have George to thank for their safety and well-being. @MarbinMiller
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Shortly thereafter, in 2011, President Barack Obama appointed Sheldon to be Acting Assistant Secretary for Children and Families at the Department of Health and Human Services, where he served through 2013.

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Bob Butterworth, Former Mayor, Judge, AG, and Broward County Sheriff, and Trustee of Our Kids (ever CEO?)

Photo Credit: Broward Beat

Bob Butterworth was a county and circuit courts judge in Broward County, Fla from 1974 – 1978, prior to being appointed Sheriff from 1979 – 1982. He did a two-year stint as the director of Florida's Department of Motor Vehicles, then became mayor of Sunrise in 1984 to clean up a mess after the head of a Miami Beach health center stole $7 million. He went on to serve as the Attorney General of Florida from 1987 – 2002.

Tragically, on the eve of his election in 1986, his ex-wife Saundra shot their 16-year-old son and herself, killing them both on a street in Miami.

In 2006, Butterworth was named Secretary of the Department of Children and Families (DCF), by Gov. Charlie Crist, who referred to Butterworth as "the kind of guy that gets things done. He's a fixer." He served until 2008 when George Sheldon took over.

In 2008, leaders of child welfare programs announced the 'Bob Butterworth Endowment to Assist Youth Aging Out of Foster Care.' Of course, then Secretary George Sheldon joined to make the announcement, and The Eckerd Family Foundation contributed $10,000 to launch the endowment.

Butterworth went back into law and has worked with Fowler White Boggs focusing on government relations. In 2016 he was appointed to the Florida Bar Foundation Board.

In 2012, Butterworth led a nonprofit mental health group called the Broward Behavioral Health Coalition (BBHC). They were in competition with another nonprofit, the Partnership for Community Health, for a bid to provide mental health services in a $45 million DCF contract. They lost the bid, filed a 22-page bid protest, and alleged that BBHC didn't file required financial documents, and was allowed to see the partnership's bid and underbid them, which proved true. They also alleged that BBHC was serving as a front for its partner organization, the for-profit Concordia, who was paying Butterworth as a lawyer and lobbyist. Butterworth didn't dispute that they would be working with them, and issued an assurance that BBHC's board is "a who's who" of Broward community leaders, judges, doctors, and politicians. An appeals court threw the case out because the challenger failed to post a required "protest bond."

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Concordia was only 18-months old at that time, with little experience in the behavioral health industry. It was founded by CEO Carlos A. Saladrigas who has a background serving on the board of Duke Energy Corporation, CEO of Regis HR Group, Chairman of a Miami bank, independent director at Advance Auto Parts, and several other positions. All of which seem quite a bit off course from behavioral health.

This becomes more concerning when it was discovered that while this deal with DCF was in the works, Concordia shareholder Miguel B. Fernandez gave $125,000 to Let's Get to Work, which was a fundraising organization setup with Gov. Rick Scott's support. Fernandez also controlled a company called MBF Family Investments, who also contributed to Let's Get to Work since September 2010. The grand total contributed came to $625,000.

All of this shows a typical pay-to-play political game everyone has seen over and over again. Meanwhile, who's concerned about the real problem? The contract is about the mental and behavioral health of those in Broward County, yet another area of privatization in the state of Florida.

When considering that connected politicians and big money did the talking, it makes one reflect on the Stoneman Douglas High School Shooting. Psychiatrists had recommended an involuntary admission of alleged shooter **Nikolas Cruz**, beginning in 2013. DCF investigated him in 2016 over snapchat posts where he had cut both of his arms and said he planned to buy a gun. In September 2016, a school resource officer along with two guidance counselors, suggested they Baker Act him, but two mental health professionals from Henderson Behavioral Health didn't agree, and concluded he didn't meet the criteria for an involuntary committal.

Guess who funds Henderson Behavior Health? Butterworth's Broward Behavioral Health Coalition (BBHC), ChildNet Inc., of course DCF, and several others. In fact, they are listed on BBHC's website as one of their providers.

In 2017, Bob Butterworth became a trustee of Our Kids, as indicated in their 2018 tax returns.

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Alarming Statistics on Florida's Foster Care System and Human Trafficking

As of 2018, there were seven states with privatized foster care; Florida, Georgia, Kansas, Michigan, Nebraska, Pennsylvania, and Texas. Kansas was the first to implement the federally-funded program back in 1996. Coincidentally, five of the seven privatized states are ranked in the top ten for the highest level of hotline calls and reports on human trafficking. Florida is ranked 3rd, behind California and Texas.

2017 Rank	States, listed in descending order by total 2017 hotline calls	2017	2016	2015
1	California	1305	1329	986
2	Texas	792	667	437
3	Florida	604	555	410
4	Ohio	365	375	289
5	New York	333	332	295
6	Michigan	305	249	151
7	Georgia	276	255	199
8	North Carolina	221	181	116
9	Nevada	199	168	138
10	Pennsylvania	199	157	111

The 2019 'Trafficking in Persons' report, produced by the U.S. Department of State, concludes:

"In the United States, traffickers prey upon children in the foster care system. Recent reports have consistently indicated that a large number of victims of child sex trafficking were at one time in the foster care system."

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This is a well-documented fact. So what measures has Florida's well-funded, privatized agencies taken to combat this? Why is it that four of the seven states that happen to have privatized foster care, are among the highest ranked for human trafficking? And, why does the oversight of foster homes continue to lack, allowing for abusive situations?

Despite passing several different pieces of legislation dating back to 2012, and the creation of the statewide council on human trafficking, somehow the numbers continue to be high, maintaining Florida's position in the top three.

It certainly doesn't help when a DCF spokesman is charged for producing child pornography. In 2008, Al Zimmerman had taken nude photos of at least two teenage boys for distribution to overseas pornographers. DCF hasn't even done a criminal background on him, so after his arrest they decided it might just be a good idea to run background checks on employees. They found that 1,300 employees had not had a background check done. These folks work around children – how was it no mandatory? Child predators prey on them in the foster care system, throughout schools, daycares, Boy Scouts, and everywhere else kids gather. Of all agencies to know this, it should be DCF.

In 2017 The Palm Beach Post did a report about the rise of human trafficking in Florida. They stated that there were nearly 1,900 reports of human trafficking statewide, which was a 54 percent increase from the previous year. Authorities say that South Florida's high level of tourism and transient population make them a target.

Sadly, foster care is a big business, and according to a 2006 report by ABC, taxpayers were spending $22 billion a year on foster care programs. Now, there are so many different areas of federal funding for foster care, adoption services, and overall care for children, pinning down an annual amount gets a bit trickier.

In 2010, Florida received a statewide waiver of Title IV-E foster care funding, which allows for flexibility in funding. That same year, the Title IV-E wavier provided Florida with $478 million of the state's total federal child welfare spending.

In 2017, more than 690,000 children spent time in U.S. foster care, with the average age being eight-years-old. One third of the foster care children were of color, and two thirds Caucasian. It has been significantly increasing over the past five years, and the highest it's been since 2008.

Approximately 50,000 foster kids are adopted each year, and 29% of them will have spent at least three years in foster care prior to the adoption.

Billions of taxpayer dollars line the pockets of agencies, while many foster care children continue to suffer abuse, are recklessly removed from good homes, and some become targets of traffickers. When will the heat be removed from this cyclone?

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The Bottom Line

Florida decided it would be best to privatize foster care and adoption services, despite indications that it would not save money or necessarily improve the lives of children. Gov. Jeb Bush decided to double down on the funding, while Berta Blecke and Judge Cindy Lederman went to bat for Our Kids Miami-Dade Inc. to get the $93 million contract back in 2004 – a contract that quickly evolved to a 5-year $500 million prize. Relationships among politicians, judges, and wealthy business owners grew stronger – so strong that most of them committed major ethics violations, pay-to-play schemes, and essentially contract fraud.

The politicians want foster care, adoption services, mental and behavioral health privatized. Why? Because it gives them the opportunity to own a slice of it, control it, and manipulate the system to bend in their favor. See how that works? None of this is for the benefit of children, for if it were, the abuse throughout foster care, number of children in the system, and human trafficking numbers would all be going down. Sadly, they are not. The cost of Florida's privatized system has gone up by millions, and the abuse rate is so bad that law firms and child rights organizations are suing DCF. Florida is ranked number three in the country for human trafficking, and the foster care system is preying grounds for traffickers.

The executives at Our Kids, as well as other agencies in Florida are being paid steep wages, some at six figures, and some as much as double what state employees were being paid in the same positions before it was privatized. This is a money game. It's always been a money game. But is it more than that as well? What about these 25 children who were moved 80 times? Or the thousands of others that were moved 10-20 times in one year? Is this a form of child trafficking out in the open while they collect their stipend from the government?

The rush into Haiti to "airlift" out hundreds of children without having documentation proving they were in fact orphans, and without attempting to locate their family members before the dust even settled, was a complete disgrace. Until this day, few know where all of those children went, and they clearly are not talking. But this gang of clowns above most certainly played a role in that shit show, while they continue to praise themselves.

Bottom line – South Florida, and likely many other parts of the state, is a giant Nest of politicians, judges, real estate agents, lawyers, and big-money clowns that are running the privatized agencies to allegedly better the system for the children. That hasn't happened. It has only gotten worse. While the five judges await their Supreme Court ruling, it is likely they will settle on the simple reprimand suggested by the Florida Judicial Qualifications Commission. Two of the judges whose names were on the letter are now retired.

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This shows how the money flows through the nest of high level players that are only looking out for themselves as opposed to the children. This nest can be seen all across the country in multiple states, with players pulling off the same operations, and not being held accountable. The question is – is it all about the money – or is it also about child trafficking? The bigger question is – when will these schemes come to an end? People observing these nests in their own hometowns need to speak up, need to do their own digging, and need to expose the corruption taking place. If they are willing to break all the rules to cover for one another, get big contracts, and funnel their buddies contracts – do you really believe they have children in their best interest? Look at their track record above, and look at Florida's track record overall. It's time to clean house!

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